DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 272 837 CG 019 321

AUTHOR Carroll, Mary Ann
TITLE A Philosophical Perspective on Teaching Ethics to Undergraduate Psychology Majors.
PUB DATE Aug 86
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (94th, Washington, DC, August 22-26, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Curriculum; College Students; Counselor Training; *Ethical Instruction; Higher Education; *Moral Values; *Student Development; *Undergraduate Students; *Value Judgment

ABSTRACT

The disadvantages of trying to deal with ethical issues as they arise in relevant undergraduate courses are outweighed by the advantages of devoting an entire course to such issues. Undergraduate students typically oversimplify moral problems and they also tend to have difficulty articulating their reasons for making the moral judgments that they make. Therefore they need to develop the skills of: (1) thinking carefully about those facts of a case that have direct bearing on a moral judgment; (2) learning to ask relevant questions; (3) articulating the basis for their ethical decisions; and (4) testing those decisions for consistency. But students cannot adequately develop such skills while at the same time trying to learn all the necessary factual content of a particular area in psychology; hence a separate course devoted to moral reasoning is necessary. The best method of helping students develop these skills is to take a case studies approach, using cases that are directly relevant to psychology. In doing so, students will not only be forced to think about some moral problems that a psychologist must often face but they will also be introduced to theoretical and conceptual considerations. (An illustration of this method is provided.) (Author/ABL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED272837

A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON TEACHING ETHICS TO UNDERGRADUATE PSYCHOLOGY MAJORS

Mary Ann Carroll

CG 019321

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

✓ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Mary Ann Carroll

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, 94th, Washington, DC, August 22-26, 1986.

A Philosophical Perspective on Teaching Ethics to Undergraduate Psychology Majors: Abstract

Mary Ann Carroll, Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy
Department of Philosophy and Religion
Appalachian State University
Boone, NC 28608
[Visiting Associate Professor of Philosophy (1986-87)
Department of Philosophy
University of Richmond
Virginia 23173]

Two assumptions must be made if ethics is to be incorporated into an undergraduate psychology program: (1) ethics is not a subjective matter and (2) ethics is not fair game for just anyone to teach. Assumption (1) requires that a distinction be made between ethics and religion, and mere personal opinion. This requirement, coupled with assumption (2), entails that a separate ethics course be developed which focuses on a variety of moral problems that arise in psychology, preferably one that is team-taught by a philosopher and a psychologist.

The disadvantages of trying to deal with ethical issues as they arise in relevant undergraduate courses are outweighed by the advantages of devoting an entire course to such issues. Undergraduate students typically oversimplify moral problems and they also tend to have difficulty articulating their reasons for making the moral judgments that they do. Therefore they need to develop the skills of thinking carefully about those facts of a case that have direct bearing on a moral judgment, learning to ask relevant questions, articulating the basis for their ethical decisions, and testing those decisions for consistency. But students cannot adequately develop such skills while at the same time trying to learn all the necessary factual content of a particular area in psychology; hence a separate course devoted to moral reasoning is necessary.

CG 019321

However, students must first be familiar with a good deal of the factual content in order to gain, at some level, an appreciation of the types of activities in which psychologists may engage (since this is where ethical problems arise). Thus an ethics course at the undergraduate level should normally be restricted to students who have the necessary background in psychology.

The best method of helping students develop these skills is to take a case studies approach, using cases that are directly relevant to psychology. In doing so, they will not only be forced to think about some moral problems that psychologist must often face but they will also be introduced to theoretical and conceptual considerations. An illustration of this method is provided.

Mary Ann Carroll, Ph.D., Professor of Philosophy
Department of Philosophy and Religion
Appalachian State University
Boone, NC 28608
(704) 262-3089
[Visiting Associate Professor of Philosophy (1986-87)
Department of Philosophy
University of Richmond
Richmond, VA 23171]

A Philosophical Perspective on Teaching Ethics to Undergraduate Psychology Majors

(Presented at 94th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association at Washington D.C., August 1986)

CG 019321

Having taught introductory ethics, business ethics, medical ethics, and ethics in the practice of psychology to undergraduates, I am painfully aware of their lack of ability to reason carefully about moral problems, to see the complexity of such problems, and to be able to justify ethical judgments they make when presented with case studies. So I wholeheartedly agree that any bachelor's degree program, perhaps particularly in psychology and other helping professions, should require majors to confront ethical issues and learn how to go about resolving moral dilemmas that arise in their field.

I should note at the outset that I will not deal at all with values clarification. "Values clarification" causes me, like other philosophers in ethics, to shiver--one may clarify one's values till doomsday but unless those values are subjected to critical evaluation and ethical scrutiny, they have no bearing on right and wrong behavior. (As philosophers like to point out, Attila the Hun no doubt had his values quite clarified.) So my comments will focus on how and when I think ethics should be incorporated into an undergraduate psychology degree program. Before doing so, however, I must first make explicit two assumptions which provide the basis for the position I will take.

When the issue of teaching ethics arises outside of philosophy, the question "Whose ethics are you going to teach?" is not uncommonly asked. Perhaps this question is raised because ethics is confused with religion or subjective feelings. But I shall assume that ethics and the process of moral decisionmaking are objective matters. Without such an assumption, this symposium would be a waste of time. Besides, even on a subjectivist approach there must be some ethical principle that is used to make moral judgments. Nevertheless, those persons with "an ethics" typically have not tried to apply their principles in a systematic way or to test them for consistency. Further, relatively few people are aware of possible problems that may arise when their principles are applied to concrete cases. In light of these points, I shall make another assumption: the fact that someone is a professional in a particular field does not automatically qualify him or her to teach students the process of moral reasoning nor about the ethical problems that arise in one's area of specialty. Philosophy, like psychology, is a profession and hence ethics as a field in philosophy is not fair game for just anyone to try to teach, even at the undergraduate level (despite the fact that there is no licensing in philosophy as there is in psychology).

In light of this second assumption, I want to argue that a separate course on ethical issues in psychology should be incorporated into the undergraduate curriculum, preferably team-taught by a philosopher and a psychologist (though a philosopher who has sufficient knowledge of psychology or a psychologist who has more than a superficial understanding of ethical ethical theory and moral decisionmaking could adequately teach such a course).

However, there does seem to be at least one advantage to discussing ethical issues when they arise in courses such as abnormal psychology or research and experimentation. If students are made cognizant of moral problems throughout their undergraduate career, they may be more apt to integrate ethics

into their regular courses and to identify more readily ethical issues when they arise. But this advantage does not outweigh the disadvantages I see with this approach. Practically speaking, there is rarely enough time to cover all relevant factual content in a course; to try to deal adequately with even one major ethical issue would take up a good part of the term. And it is crucial that when an ethical issue is brought up, it must be discussed in enough detail that students don't get the impression that a moral problem can be resolved in a hurried, off-the-cuff manner. Students must examine particular cases relating to the subject matter of the course, be able to focus on relevant facts of the case, become acquainted with major ethical considerations, learn how to ask relevant questions about the case, be able to articulate the basis for their decision, and test for consistency. And these abilities constitute the process of moral reasoning. Later I will illustrate this process by using a case study; but for now let me say that it is for these reasons I suggested that dealing with just one major ethical issue in a course (e.g., informed consent) could easily take a lot of time, which it should, if the issue is adequately discussed. And this is the business of philosophers.

These points should be sufficient to justify my claim that a philosopher must, to some extent, be involved in any undergraduate curriculum in which ethical issues are addressed. Also, psychology professors with little or no background in philosophy may tend to oversimplify an ethical problem, be less objective and, depending on the professor, to interject religious biases into the discussion. This may result in students thinking that ethical decisions are merely a matter of personal opinion and hence don't require much careful consideration. But I must also be careful to note that not all philosophers are qualified to teach a course in ethics in an undergraduate psychology program. Many, if not most, professional philosophers have enough background in ethics to teach it; but they must have some factual knowledge of psychology. Otherwise

they won't be familiar with the specific types of moral problems that arise in that profession and thus the course may be too theoretical for psychology majors. Likewise, psychology majors should have taken a sufficient number of psychology courses before taking an ethics course that focuses on moral problems in the field.

Now let me put all this in concrete terms by way of proposing a possible approach to teaching ethics in an undergraduate psychology program, one that, from my experience, has engaged students in the process of moral reasoning while at the same time has forced them to deal with theoretical and conceptual issues. Even if we weren't teaching in this Age of Relevance when many of us try to get students interested in a course by attempting to put material on a Procrustean bed of Relevance, it's a fact that students enjoy reading and discussing case studies. (This is particularly true in ethics. But since theoretical and conceptual issues cannot be avoided, you sneak them in by way of case studies and discuss such matters when they arise.) In considering the following case, I will illustrate some of the points I have been making.

> A family therapist has contracted to do therapy with a family of four. The couple has two daughters aged sixteen and fourteen. The father has agreed to participate in therapy only under the condition that there be a contract stating that all information received by the therapist from any one person in the family be revealed to everyone else. The therapist agrees, and the other members of the family consent to the terms of the contract.
>
> The main problem is focused on the sixteen-year-old. The father believes her mother has been overindulgent and has not disciplined her enough, whereas he believes she needs strict supervision. This has caused problems between the couple which are now affecting the fourteen-year-old. The mother feels that his rigid attitude is driving the sixteen-year-old away and will do the same to the fourteen-year-old.
>
> During the course of therapy, the fourteen-year-old finds out that her sister is pregnant and has made arrangements to have an abortion. She thinks this information may be revealed inadvertently in therapy either by her or her sister and is afraid her father would disown her sister if he found out. She telephones the therapist to relay this information.

(from Carroll, Schneider, and Wesley, Ethics in the Practice of Psychology, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985, p. 62.)

Here is how I would utilize this case:

1. Students are to write down their initial reaction regarding what the therapist ought to do.

2. Each student then reads to the class his or her reaction; other class members may raise questions and ask for reasons behind the judgment.

3. The professor doesn't interject any comments until all students have read their reactions and other students have commented. (It might be helpful to make notes of reactions and comments for purposes of raising questions about their reasoning.)

4. Some issues that need to be considered are:

   a. Was the problem oversimplified? For example, did anyone want to say that a contract is a contract and the therapist has to stick to it? If so, the point should be emphasized that the relevant facts of a case must be known in order to make a reasoned decision; moral judgments cannot be made in a vacuum. So:

   b. What are the relevant facts of the case? For example, does the fact that the father stipulated the conditions of therapy make a difference? Now:

   c. Was any information omitted that would be helpful in deciding what the therapist ought to do? For example, would it make a difference if the father were a very influential member of the community? Is it necessary to know the conditions under which the other members of the family consented to the terms of the contract? One theoretical issue raised by this latter question is that of voluntary, informed consent. At this point the criteria for morally valid consent could be discussed.

   d. What are the therapist's alternatives and what are the possible consequences of each? Let this question be answered from a purely factual point of view. Then the next question to raise is

   e. What are the therapist's duties? Do any of them conflict? Refer back to the list of the therapist's alternatives and their possible consequences in trying to determine if there is a conflict of duties. This case does in fact involve a conflict of duties--to abide by the contract, to maintain confidentiality, to protect clients' welfare. So:

   f. How is the conflict to be resolved? To what extent should the possible consequences of the therapist's alternatives play a role in resolving the conflict? At this point some ethical theories could be introduced. For example, if a student were to reason that more harm than good will result from the therapist's abiding by the contract, it might be pointed out that that is a utilitarian consideration. Or, suppose a student suggests that the therapist should abide by the contract and tell the father about the conversation with the daughter. Then the question could be raised, "If the therapist were in the daughter's shoes, could the therapist agree to that?" This is a Kantian consideration and the answer is, "Probably not." And here

the notion of consistency in moral reasoning should be pointed out.

An approach such as this one encourages students to become actively engaged in thinking about ethical issues that psychologists must confront. But unless the instructor is knowledgeable of the many and various ethical issues that arise in any one case, students will not learn how to think carefully about ethical problems. (Many undrgraduates prefer the easy way out of resolving a problem.) And thus they will not appreciate a very important fact--that there is difficulty resolving moral dilemmas. To ensure that they do requires assistance, at some point, from a philosopher.